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Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Byzantine Art

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Abstract

This article discusses the manner in which Pseudo-Dionysius articulates his views about the mystical experience, i.e., the act that leads the faithful to attain glimpses of the divine reality. He sees it as being comparable in particular with the activity of sculpting, which reveals a statue out of the initial material by removing in phases what is superfluous. The text also points out instances of works pertaining to Byzantine art that some researchers claim were either directly or indirectly inspired by the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. By bringing these into the foreground, we open a discussion about them because, while Pseudo-Dionysius's influence on particular artistic achievements in the West has already been established, more can be said about it with regard to accomplishments in Eastern Christendom.

Keywords: Pseudo-Dionysius; Byzantine art; *Corpus Dionysiacum*; Syria; Proclus; Plotinus; the First Ennead

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Introduction

Pseudo-Dionysius compares the experience which constitutes the object of his treatise *The Mystical Theology* (that of spiritually and intellectually gaining access to the knowledge of "mysterious things") with the process of carving a statue (ἄγαλμα). Evidently connecting his thoughts with those of Proclus and Plotinus (the latter's in the *First Ennead*), the Syrian fathoms that if what is unnecessary—i.e., the outcome of human "affections"—is removed from our souls and minds, we attain the "true vision" about reality. By subjecting ourselves to this activity we connect to their authentic source both our reason and our perception.

Books have been written about the way in which some works of Western architecture and visual arts were inspired by Pseudo-Dionysius's concepts,[1] and that influence is no longer significantly controversial. More recent texts discuss the way in which the same human endeavours—and also music—sourced themselves within the Dionysian theology in Eastern Christendom. How justified are these assumptions? This article attempts to evaluate this question.

The Notion of Beauty and the Carving of a Statue

The idea of the sculptor who reveals beauty by carving away the surplus material which encases a statue in marble or stone has a long history. Famously, Michelangelo described his technique in such terms.[2] Pseudo-Dionysius speaks about this course of action in order to illustrate the fact that the essence of things becomes known only when the outcome of the activity of perception—epitomised by him in the sense of sight—is considered an excess vis-à-vis what is really important for a human being and, in consequence, is removed from minds and souls. In the darkness that thus occurs,[3] true knowledge about reality is attained—because that is where an encounter with the Divine, who is neither perceptible nor conceptual, takes place (DN 592CD,[4] 708D[5]). This is what the Syrian upholds in *The Mystical Theology*—and his thoughts in this text complement some in *The Divine Names*:

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[1] The most known are those by P. E. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 16; J. Favier, J. James, and Y. Flamand, *The World of Chartres* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1990), 168–73. See also R. Roques, J. Pelikan, J. Leclercq, and K. Froehlich, "Introductions," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. C. Luibhéid and P. Rorem (London: SPCK, 1987), 27–28; J. Bony, "What Possible Sources for the Chevet of Saint-Denis?" in *Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis*, ed. P. Lieber Gerson (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 131–43; E. S. Mainoldi, 'L'abate Sugerio e i suoi orizzonti mimetici: san Dionigi (non l'Areopagita) tra Saint-Denis e Hagia Sophia sullo sfondo della rottura tra Oriente e Occidente Cristian,' *Studi Medievali* 58, fasc. 1 (2017): 23–45; F. Dell'Acqua, "L'auctoritas dello pseudo-Dionigi e Sugerio di Saint-Denis," *Studi Medievali* 55, fasc. 1 (2014): 189–215.

[2] Michaelangelo Buonarroti, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free"; A. Condivi, *The Life of Michelangelo,* trans. C. Holroyd (London: Pallas Athene), 2007; G. Vasari, "Michelangelo," in *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. J. Conaway Bondanella and P. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 415–88; G. Bull and P. Porter, ed. and trans., *Michelangelo Buonarroti: Life, Letters and Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1987] 2008); R. Coughlan, *The World of Michelangelo* (New York: Time Life, 1966); C. Vaughan, *Michelangelo's Notebooks: The Poetry, Letters and Art of the Great Master* (New York: Black Dog and Leventhal, 2016), 13.

> I pray we could come to this darkness so far above light! If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge. For this would be really to see and to know: to praise the Transcendent One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all beings. We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside they show up the beauty which is hidden. (*Mystical Theology*, 1025AB)[6]

It is important also to remark here that "the Beautiful" and "Beauty" (ὡς καλὸν καὶ ὡς κάλλος, as mentioned by him for instance in DN 701 C–D[7] and DN 630 BC[8]), are names Pseudo-Dionysius used for God in parallel with love, beloved (701 D),[9] "life," "light," "God," "the truth" (DN 596 B),[10] "the Good," the "Life Giving," "Wisdom," and other similar attributes. In *The Divine Names* (DN 956 B) Pseudo-Dionysius explains that his teachers "gave the name 'beauty itself' to the 'outpouring of what produces beauty itself,'"[11] that is, to "the Beautiful."

The Dionysiac Corpus and Iconography

Byzantine and post-Byzantine artists, especially in icons representing the transfiguration, tried and are still trying to suggest the divine darkness by contrast, that is, by abundantly using the colour white to suggest light in order to show what the darkness is not. In Figure 1, a mosaic from the Monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai, this is especially noticeable (nevertheless, both darkness and light—also often mentioned by the Syrian—evoke simplicity in our minds and souls; for the ancient theologian to reach this was the climax of any spiritual exercise).

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[3] B. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroads, 1994); D. Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[4] B. R. Suchla, ed., *Corpus Dionysiacum: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita. De divinis nominibus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990. Reprinted 2013 and as vol. 62, 2011), 114–15 (= *CD I*). Within the article I abbreviate the titles of Pseudo-Dionysius's treatises as follows: DN = *The Divine Names*, MT = *The Mystical Theology*; CH = *The Celestial Hierarchy*, and EH = *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

[5] *CD I*, 156.

[6] G. Heil and A. M. Ritter, *Corpus Dionysiacum II: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita De coelesti hierarchia, De ecclesiastica hierarchia, De mystica theologia, Epistulae* (Berlin: De Gruyter 1991), 145 (= *CD II*).

[7] *CD I*, 150–51.

[8] *CD I*, 99.

[9] *CD I*, 151.

[10] For instance, in *CD I*, 118.

[11] *CD I*, 223.

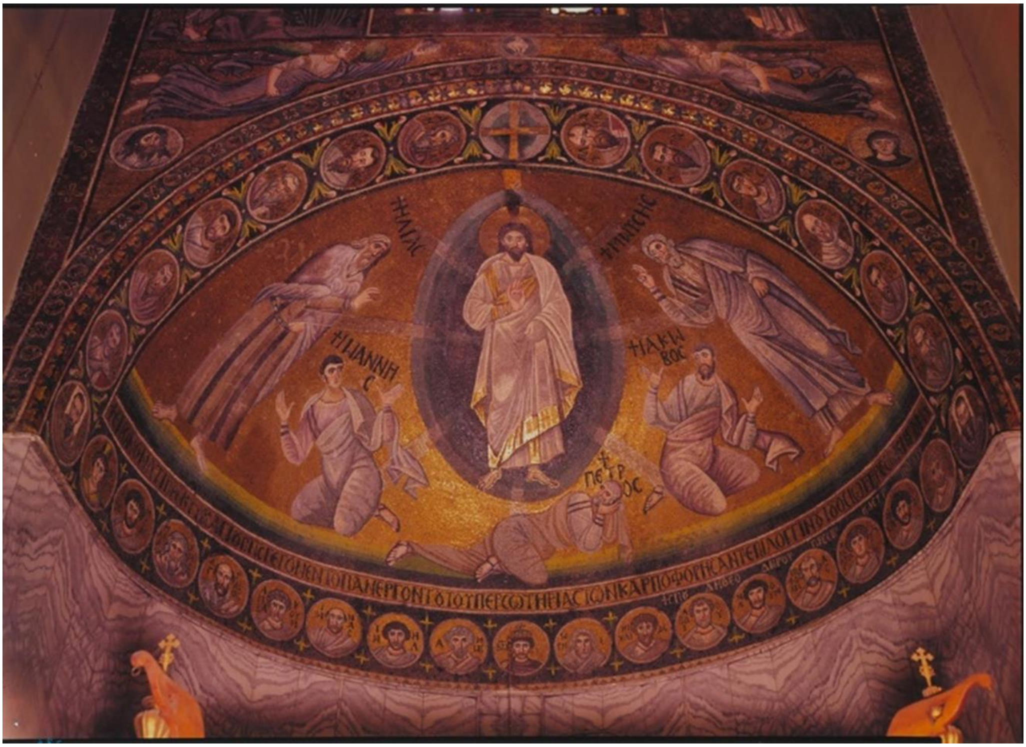

Figure 1: The Sinai Peninsula, Monastery of St. Catherine, Jesus Christ. Mosaic of the Transfiguration (mid sixth-century CE); ceramic and glass tesserae with gold (publication courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount).

When Elijah and Moses received their revelation, they were surrounded by a darkness like that about which Dionysius spoke; the iconographers who painted between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries in Sinai represented this reality in works dedicated to the two prophets. They managed to obtain the effect they wanted very well; Figure 2 testifies to this.

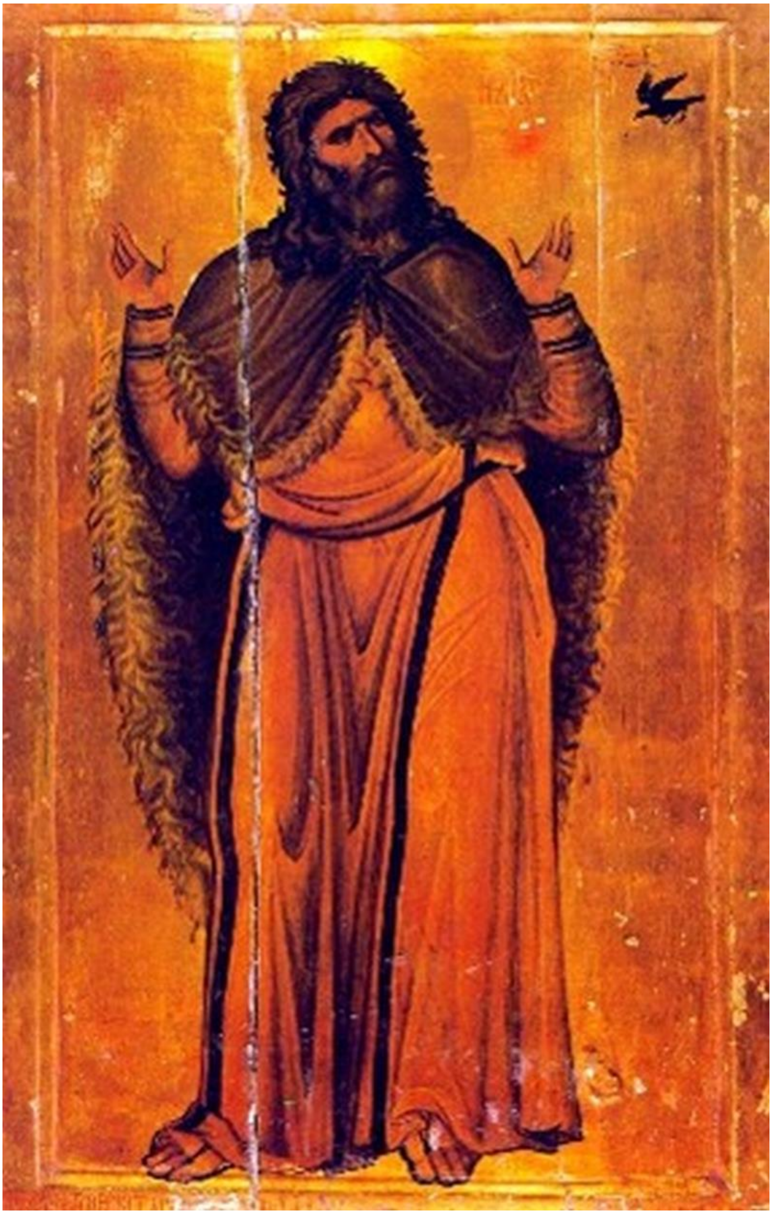

Figure 2: The Sinai Peninsula, Saint Catherine's Monastery; Prophet Elijah fed by a raven (ca. 1050–1100); tempera and gold on wood (publication courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai).

In an interesting and perhaps unexpected association of ideas, Origen parallels Christ's incarnation, i.e., his becoming an "'express image' of God's substance," with the activity of carving statues, which "taken from the region of material things … are to be allowed for no other purpose but to show that the Son, though brought within the very narrow compass of a human body, yet gave indications in the likeness of his power and works to these of God the Father, of the immense and invisible greatness that was in him."[12] István Perczel intimates that Pseudo-Dionysius knew the texts of the Alexandrian;[13] his arguments are convincing and it seems that the Syrian borrowed the metaphor of a statue from those sources. But regardless of whether or not this simile (of the statue) was an appropriation by Pseudo-Dionysius, in his writings the real meaning of perceptible symbols (used for reasons of "secrecy and accommodation," EH 377A)[14] firstly becomes evident through the use of the apophatic method, and so it can be expressed through concepts. Then the "mystical experience" thus attained (through apophatic means) goes even beyond these—it reaches to the unknowing which, as suggested, is pregnant with meanings.[15] The Syrian believed that if the sacred mysteries are contemplated exclusively *via* perceptible symbols (those "hidden" in images, musical incantations, etc.), we cannot "see," that is, experience, them "in their naked purity" (*Ep*. 9, 1104B).[16] Nevertheless, despite that conviction, throughout his work, Dionysius also addressed the positive role of "perceptible symbols in uplifting the interpreter to their conceptual meaning and beyond,"[17] and underlined that "our first leaders" (i.e., the priests) "using images derived from the senses spoke of the transcendent …. They put material on what was immaterial. In their written and unwritten initiations, they brought the transcendent down to our level" (EH, 376D).[18]

Both statements above are consistent with Pseudo-Dionysius's understanding of reality as being the result of the dynamic between the ascending and descending movements of the human mind and soul. Therefore, it is not surprising that his oeuvre has become the subject of preoccupation both to scholars interested in metaphysical issues and to those who focus on art. In spite of the fact that the works of this author "are not concerned with creative practices and accomplishments," the medieval and contemporaneous-to-us reception of his texts claimed that they inspired masterpieces in arts and even in architecture, because “artistic and architectural metaphors are present” in them.[19] Michelangelo himself might have read Pseudo-Dionysius’s treatises because he frequented the Neoplatonic circles at the court of Lorenzo de’ Medici, and according to Carolyn Vaughan, he “absorbed their philosophy and would have been inspired by [it].”[20]

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[12] G. W. Butterworth, trans. and notes, *Origen: On First Principles* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 22.

[13] On the connection between Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius, see I. Perczel, "Dionysius the Areopagite," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics*, ed. K. Parry (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 211–25; I. Perczel, "The Earliest Syriac Reception of Dionysius," in *Re-thinking Dionysius*, ed. S. Coakley and C. M. Stang (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 27–42; and I. Perczel, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Platonic Theology," in *Proclus et la théologie platonicienne: actes du Colloque International de Louvain (13–16 mai 1998) en l'Honneur de H. D. Saffrey et L. G. Westerink*, ed. A. Ph. Segonds and C. G. Steel (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 491–532.

[14] *CD II*, 66–67. Rorem comments on this subject in, among other places, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 94.

[15] P. L. Gavrilyuk, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite," in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, ed. P. L. Gavrilyuk and S. Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 86–104. Pseudo-Dionysius only used the term "experience" once in DN 648B, as Coakley notes, S. Coakley, "Introduction," in *Re-thinking Dionysius*, ed. S. Coakley and C. M. Stang (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 9n27.

[16] Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Epistula* 9, 1; 1104B in *CD II*, 193.

[17] Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 94.

[18] *CD II*, 67.

Among the subjects on which the Syrian elaborated at length—and which were considered as having been instrumental in the accomplishment of various later material creations—that of the angels (whom he considers henads, ἑνάδων, that is, “units” of power that participate in the monad that God is) was dominant. Plato introduces this concept in the dialogues *Philebus* and *Timaeus*; for him a henad is a monad that participates in the transcendent One. In *The Divine Names* (DN 589D), Pseudo-Dionysius not only refers to the fact that God is presented in the Scriptures inter alia as “a monad or henad” (for him these are identical),[21] but he also mentions the fact that the divine Power protects the immortality of the “angelic henads” (DN 892D). Inglis Patrick Sheldon-Williams comments on the angels-henads connection as it appears in Dionysius’s writings; he seems to suggest that the Syrian intimates that the angels have a similar nature to that of the henads. This scholar convincingly argues that Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius held the same view on the issue of henads and that both were inspired by Syrianus’s notions, which they adapted to their own theoretical “systems.” He also maintains that the three thinkers adjusted what they learnt about henads to their own ideas about celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies; this is especially clear in the case of Proclus, who says that henads are lesser gods who constitute “radiations” from the supreme Divinity.[22] Sheldon-Williams goes on to explain why such a view is problematic,[23] but what is significant for this paper is that both Syrianus and Pseudo-Dionysius saw God as the universal Cause. They also similarly conceived henads as being related to the “intelligibles,”[24] and managed to avoid confusing “the three Hypostases within the Tetrarchy with the procession of powers which, symbolised by the Divine Names, confer being in all its degrees upon His creatures,"[25] hence also on the angels. To mix the Hypostases with the "processions" would have been an easy mistake to make.

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[19] J. Bogdanovic, “Rethinking the Dionysian Legacy in Medieval Architecture: East and West,” in *Dionysius the Areopagite between Orthodoxy and Heresy*, ed. F. Ivanović (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), 132.

[20] Vaughan, *Michelangelo’s Notebooks*, 13.

[21] *CD I*, 112. Throughout his corpus Pseudo-Dionysius deploys descriptions similar to those used when he refers to henads in order to distinguish “the Divine Unity” from the Trinity. But we have to mention that he does not use the term henad more than I indicated above; he refers to it through suggestive descriptions.

[22] E. R. Dodds, ed., *Proclus: The Elements of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2014), and I. P. Sheldon-Williams, “Henads and Angels: Proclus and the Ps.-Dionysius,” *Studia Patristica* 11 (1972): 66.

[23] Sheldon-Williams, “Henads and Angels,” 66–71. Elaborations on some of the debates around this and connected themes are, for instance, in M. J. Edwards, *Image, Word and God in the Early Christian Centuries* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), especially 117–34.

[24] Sheldon-Williams, “Henads and Angels,” 69.

In spite of agreeing with Syrianus on the topic of the nature of henads, Pseudo-Dionysius follows Plotinus in applying the principle of triadisation to the intelligible worlds, which for him comprehends the totality of the angels. The description that he offers with respect to the ordering of these heavenly beings in the second part of *The Celestial Hierarchy* show the angels, beginning with those closest to God, grouped in nine categories. These are organised in three triads, each divided into three, thus: 1. seraphim cherubim, thrones; 2. dominions, powers, authorities; and 3. archangels, angels and principalities. The Syrian designates all types of angels through the word "winds" because they are supposed to move swiftly:

> They [the angels] are also named "winds" as a sign of the virtually instant speed with which they operate everywhere, their coming and going from above to below and again from below to above as they raise up their subordinates to the highest peak and as they prevail upon their own superiors to proceed down into fellowship with and concern for those beneath them. (CE 333B–C)[26]

The image in the following figure (Figure 3a, 3b) is demonstrative for the ideas expressed in this fragment; but there are numerous representations of angels in Byzantium and the "Byzantine Commonwealth"[27] apt to illustrate these. The fastness of the angels' exploits is the reason why in iconography these otherworldly beings are represented as having wings.

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[25] Sheldon-Williams, "Henads and Angels," 70.

[26] *CD II*, 55. See also *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. C. Luibhéid and P. Rorem (London: SPCK, 1987), 187, and R. Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. M. Higton (London: SCM, 2007).

[27] D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500–1453* (New York: Praeger, 1971).

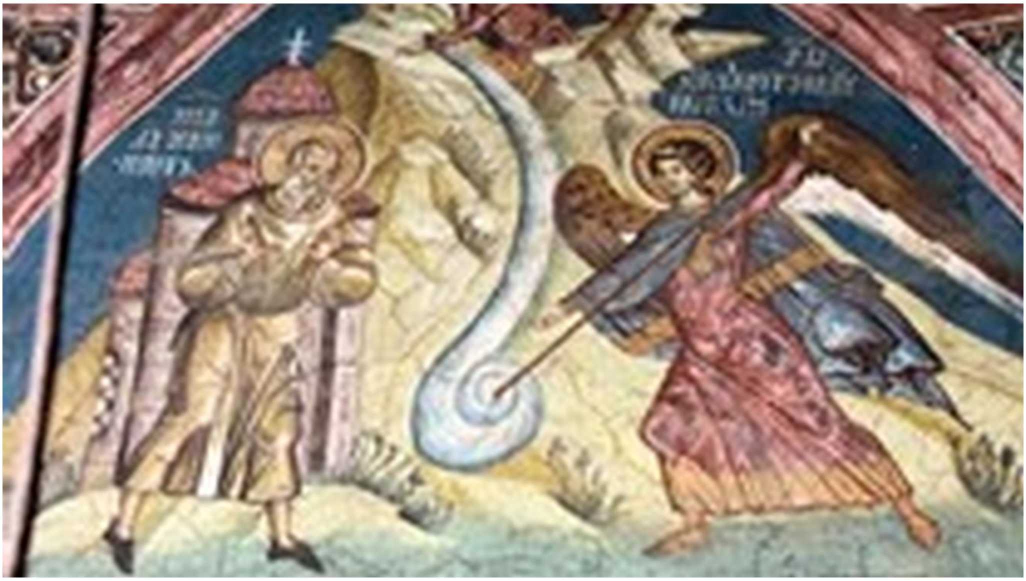

Figure 3a: Colossae. The Miracle Performed by Archangel Michael (tenth century[?]). (The image is online and freely accessible under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 licence. Accessed 5 December 2020, https://hellenicnews.com/miracle-of-the-archangel-michael-in-colossae/.)

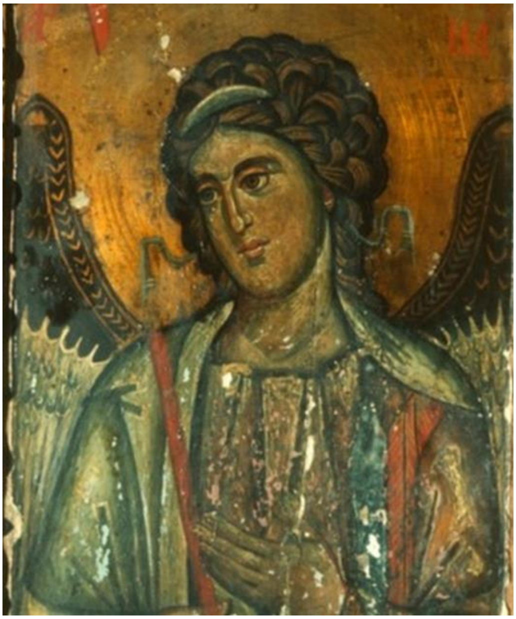

Figure 3b: Sinai Peninsula, Monastery of St. Catherine; Archangel Gabriel; wood panel (date unknown). Published courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai.

Among the other numerous examples of iconography which Emil Ivanov ascertains to be inspired by Pseudo-Dionysius's treatises,[28] some, as expected, refer to these heavenly powers. He ascribes a wide range to their alleged artistic renderings: from the four apocalyptic creatures depicted (in the form of angels) within the mosaic inside the mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, decorated in 430–450, to an angel inside the main church at Gračanica Monastery, 1321, within the former medieval Serbian kingdom.[29] He refers to one angel, but actually there are many beautifully rendered such heavenly beings within the Church of the Assumption, Gračanica monastic complex (Figure 4). (His idea concerning the decoration in Ravenna, dated to the fifth century, is an anachronism since later research shows that Pseudo-Dionysius lived in the sixth century).

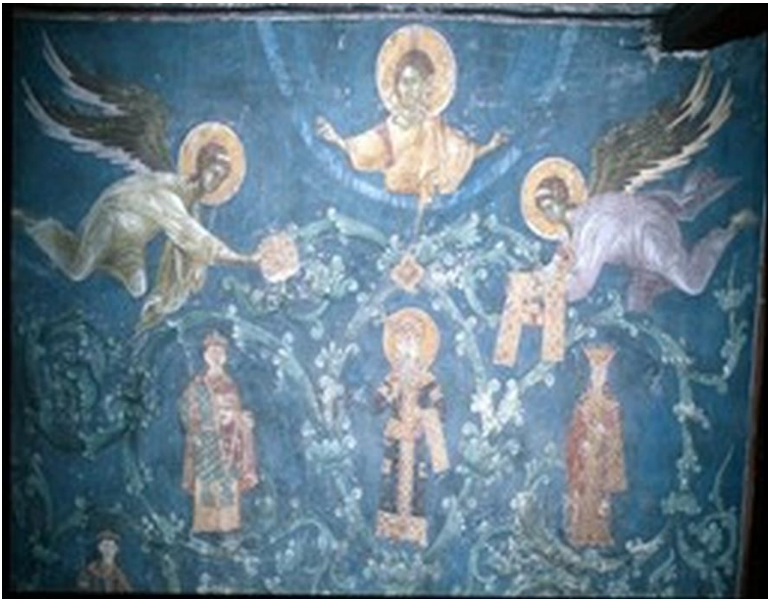

Figure 4: Angels represented the crowing of Queen Simonida (King Milutin's wife) in the Church of the Assumption at Gračanica Monastery, c. 1321. (Image used in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 licence. Accessed 19 September 2017, http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-holy-gracanica-monastery-church-of-the-assumption-of-the-serbian-orthodox-11936524.html.)

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[28] E. Ivanov, "Iconographic Interpretations of Theological Themes in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and in St. Gregory Palamas and the Reception of these Themes by Meister Eckhart," *Studii Teologice*, 7 no. 4 (2011): 172–92; Gračanica is mentioned on p. 176 and reproduced in Figure 3 on that page.

[29] Ivanov, "Iconographic Interpretations." Galla Placidia's mausoleum is mentioned on p. 176 and Gračanica Monastery on p. 174; the latter is also reproduced in Figure 3 on p. 176.

I would personally supplement the list of the exemplars adduced by Ivanov here by mentioning the famous White Angel from the church of Mileševa Monastery, southwest Serbia, founded by King Stefan Vladislav I between 1234 and 1236.[30]

Zaga Gavrilović points out a particular sub-motif of Dionysian inspiration that is to be found within some depictions concerning angels: those which show them holding discs, "presumably mirrors." The fresco of the Anastasis in Dečani Monastery (c. 1340) that renders this trope is the only one that has survived.

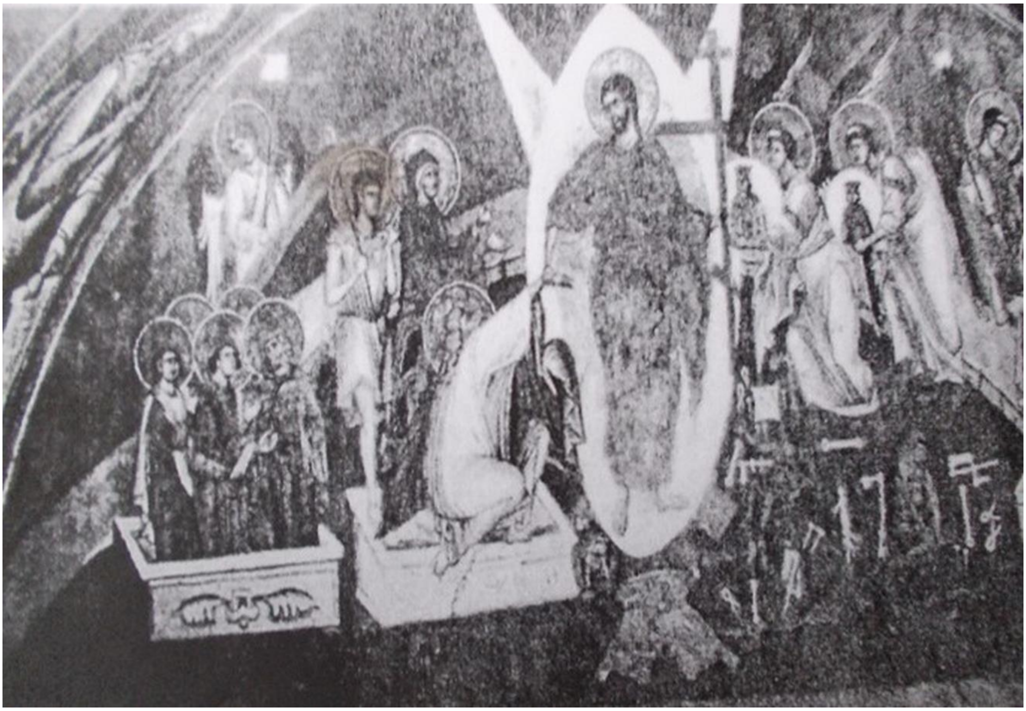

Figure 5: Anastasis at Dečani, c. 1340.[31]

The bright and "untarnished" mirrors visible in the fresco at Dečani signify the fact that the angels receive and reflect God's light and beauty. As revealed within *The Celestial Hierarchy*, also the dignity of "enjoying" the knowledge of the Divine (some of them the "immediate" one)[32] has been bestowed on them. Two mentions need to be made with Gavrilović: sometimes Byzantine iconographers identify the angels by name:

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[30] V. Milanović, "Gospel Scenes in the Narthex of the Mileševa Church: A Contribution to the Reconstruction and Interpretation of the Original Programme," *Zograf* 37 (2013):107–32.

[31] Z. Gavrilović, "Discs Held by Angels in the Anastasis at Dečani," in Z. Gavrilović, *Studies in Byzantine and Serbian Medieval Art* (London: The Pindar Press, 2001), 181–97. The image in Figure 3 is on p. 191.

[32] Sheldon-Williams, "Henads and Angels," 68.

Jegudiel, Gabriel, Selaphiel, Michael, Uriel, Raphael, Barachiel,[33] Jerahmeel, etc. At other times they "confuse cherubim and seraphim by depicting them as visually identical, with six, many-eyed wings";[34] in such cases only the captions aid their recognition, therefore attention should be paid to these accompanying texts. The above-mentioned description regarding the various categories of celestial powers with their "eyed wings" is found in the Liturgy of John Chrysostom, which Dionysius certainly knew. Therefore, the source of this type of iconography is not to be searched for primarily within the Dionysiac Corpus.

For Ivanov, the representation of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, belongs to the artistic undertakings concerning angels—the more so because the icon-painters have sometimes shown this attribute of the Divine represented not only as a woman, but also as "the image of an angel sitting at a festive … table." This is how the sacred Wisdom appears in the churches of St. Sophia (1235) and St. Clement (1294–1295), both in Ohrid, as well as in the monastic churches at Gračanica (1321) and Dečani (c. 1340). The same researcher also argues that an illustration of the opening statement from Pseudo-Dionysius's treatises *The Mystical Theology* ("Supernal Triad, Deity above all essence, knowledge and goodness; Guide of Christians to Divine Wisdom!") was visually expressed in the frescoes referring to Sophia in Chrelio Tower of Rila Monastery, Bulgaria, 1335–1336, and in the church of St. John Prodromos, Yaroslavl, Russia, 1694–1695.[35] Moreover, Ivanov proposes that the celestial hierarchy as peculiar to Pseudo-Dionysius's thought is represented, for instance, in two places within the church of Sant'Apollinare in Classe (mosaics, 539); but this is, again, an anachronism.[36] This scholar details that inside the church of Sant'Apollinare in Classe the central space around Christ is filled with stars that are depicted "on a blue background—an undoubtedly strong indication about the nine celestial ranks and … their angels and other powers, [which are of] a number that excels the potential of the human eye."[37] A representation of the way the space between heaven and earth is filled with angels is, for instance, the Ladder of Virtues (e.g., at Pângărați Monastery, Figure 6 below—here the angels help people to ascend to God).

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[33] The angels whose names are listed before that of Jerahmeel form what is represented in Byzantine iconography as "the *Angelic Council*." Some examples of works rendering angels that are named are as follows: Selaphiel is represented in a Russian icon that portrays bishop Herodion of Patras and Archangel Selaphiel (1840) and archangels Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael are depicted in the stained-glass windows within St Ailbe's Church in Ireland.

[34] Gavrilović, "Discs Held by Angels," 181–97.

[35] Ivanov, "Iconographic Interpretations," 175.

[36] Ivanov, "Iconographic Interpretations," 178.

[37] Ivanov, "Iconographic Interpretations," 177.

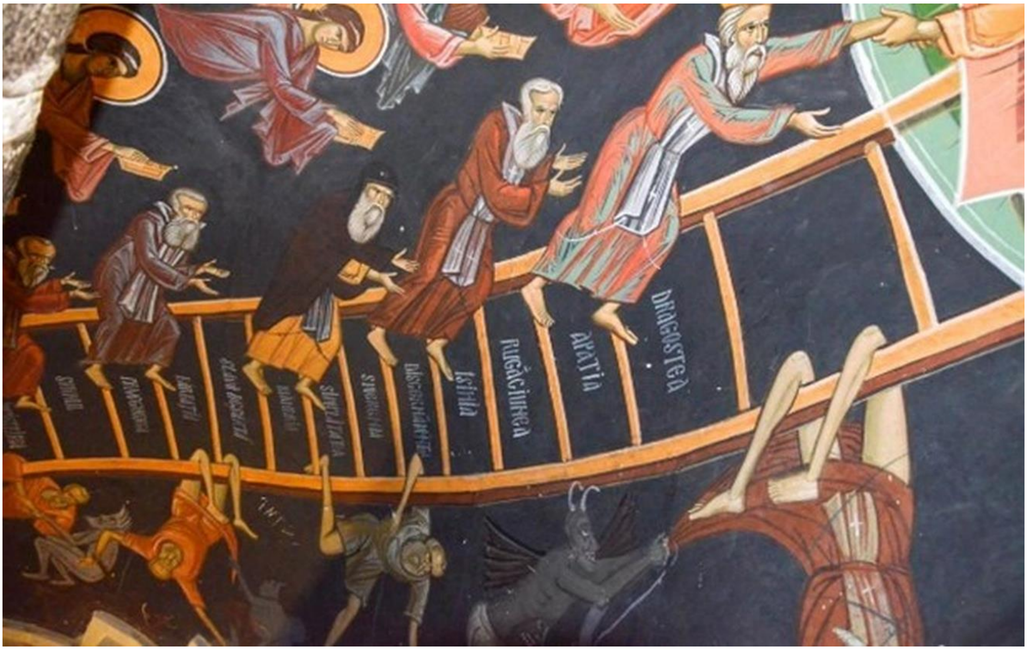

Figure 6: Pângărați Monastery, Neamț County. The Ladder of Virtues (fifteenth century) (personal photo, July 2015).

Ivanov also asserts that “The oldest undoubted iconographic examples showing the Celestial Hierarchy are in the collection of crosses at Limburg”;[38] these pieces were made of enamel on gilded background. They are the products of a Constantinople workshop and were created in 963–968; so was a miniature in Vienna codex Suppl. gr. 2, fol. 1v from the second half of the twelfth century.

This scholar in the East and Jean Favier in the West (the latter together with his colleagues),[39] see connections between the notions within Dionysius’s treatise *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and multiple human creations. Moreover, Favier finds a resemblance between the artists described in EH IV.3 and those who built and decorated Chartres Cathedral in the Middle Ages (1194 and 1220). Ivanov, who conceives the various depictions of “The Last Judgement” as illustrations of the above-mentioned treatise, offers a few instances that are supposed to refer to it. Among these, there are the illuminations peculiar to the Greek codex 74, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (eleventh century); the mosaic on the western wall of the church at Torcello (eleventh century); two icons in St. Catherine Monastery, Sinai from the second half of the twelfth century; the frescoes in the church of Panagia Mavriotissa, Kastoria (twelfth century), and those in Kvarke Kilisse, Cappadocia (1212) as well as its representation in the southern wing of the church at Chora (1315–1320). Frescoes illustrating groupings of church prelates ("The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy") exist, for instance, in the fresco entitled "The Dormition of the Mother of God" at Staro Nagoričino, in its upper part (1316–1318); in the church at Marko Monastery (around 1375) as well as in the fresco known as "The Last Judgement" on the external north wall of St. George Church, Voroneț Monastery, Romania (c.1488–1496), and that by the same name in St. Catherine Monastery, Sinai (date unknown); the latter icons contain very noticeable figures of bishops and priests) (see Figure 7).[40]

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[38] Ivanov, “Iconographic Interpretations,” 177.

[39] Favier, James, and Flamand, *World of Chartres*, 168–73.

While some of Ivanov's suppositions might be correct, certainly not all of them are. It is likely that the patron who commissioned the beautification of the church within Gračanica's precincts (1321), the Serbian king Stefan Milutin,[41] or rather the fresco-painters he surrounded himself with, knew the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. The same might have been the case with regard to the founders and Masters who worked at Pângăraţi Monastery, Neamţ Country, Romania. That was established by the ruling Prince Alexandru/Alexander Lăpușneanu in 1560.[42] As Andrew Louth cautions with regard to the creations of the Syrian: "secular scholars who readily trace the aesthetic ideals of the Byzantines, or their hierarchical notions of political society, back to Dionysius sometimes perhaps [do so] without sufficient discrimination."[43] And "Dionysius' influence is pervasive, though not all-pervasive. It is also uneven, both in the sense that some Byzantines seem more open to his influence than others, and also in the sense that there is a very generalized influence, alongside genuine attempts at engagement with his thought."[44]

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[40] A. Grishin, "Eastern Christian Iconographic and Architectural Traditions: Eastern Orthodox," in *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity,* ed. K. Parry (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 383.

[41] S. Ćurčić, *Gračanica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[42] M. M. Székely, "Cuvântul pentru zidirea Sfintei Mănăstiri Pângăraţi şi figura ctitorului ideal în Moldova secolelor XV–XVI ["A word concerning the building of the Holy Monastery of Pângăraţi and the figure of the ideal Ktetor/Patron in the Moldavia between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries"]," *Studii şi Materiale de Istorie Medie* 31 (2013): 275–99.

[43] A. Louth, "Reception of Dionysius in the Byzantine World: Maximus to Palamas," in *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite,* ed. S. Coakley and C. M. Stang (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 55.

[44] Louth, "Reception of Dionysius," 55–56.

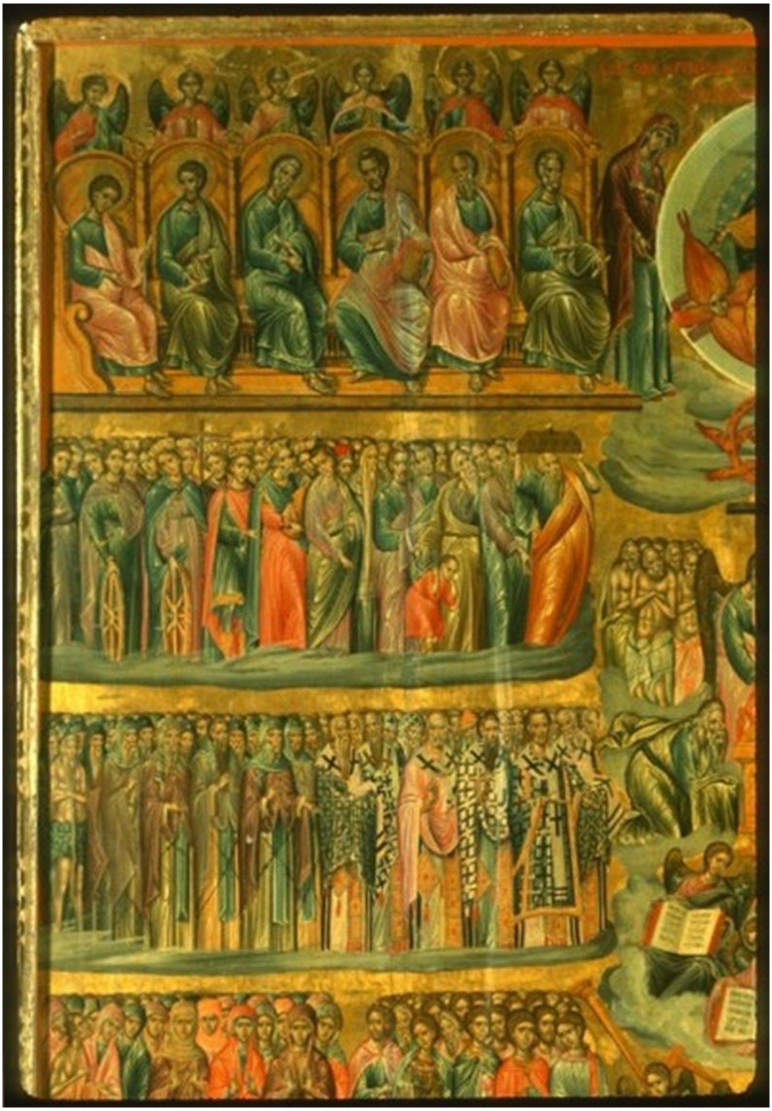

Figure 7: Sinai Peninsula, Monastery of St. Catherine, Last Judgement; date unknown (my own dating would be thirteenth century. Publication courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai).

The Dionysiac Corpus and Architecture

Pseudo-Dionysius's texts were also considered (positively) "responsible" for works in architecture. As mentioned at the outset of the article, the concept of the Syrian regarding the ascent towards God through continual spiritual exercise (which culminates in union, *henosis*, with the One)[45] might have served to Suger, the abbot of Saint-Denis from 1122 to 1151, to oversee the construction of his church.[46] He knew very well the text of *The Celestial Hierarchy*, where Pseudo-Dionysius analyses the aesthetics of visual symbols and speaks about "uplifting and luminous beauty"[47] (CH 120A–124A[48]). Jean Bony considers that the construction of Saint-Denis was a sign of a "revival of Greco-Roman and Late Antique vocabulary in architecture,"[49] but this is debatable. According to Rorem, Suger intended the building to reflect in its design the ideas of the "Areopagite," and reasoned that the abbot managed to accomplish his goal. Because the church has been widely considered the first Gothic structure, the discussion about a Dionysian influence in its construction and in that of other similar edifices has been perpetuated.[50]

Further evidence to support Rorem's opinion may be found in the work of Bogdanovic; she makes a case that some Romanesque and Gothic churches display in their carved decoration and their sculptures elements mentioned in Pseudo-Dionysius's texts, "from angelic figures via humans to the lowliest creatures such as worms, from personifications of natural phenomena (winds, clouds) to attempts to record miracles."[51] She also argues that Gothic cathedrals reflect "the compendium of human knowledge, transience of the material world and search for the immortal, ultimate, and divine truth."[52] The fact that some patrons of cathedrals and churches thought along the same lines, and that Pseudo-Dionysius wrote compositions about the soul's ascent to God, which some of the benefactors read, resulted in the urge for the latter to put their own as well as the Syrian's ideas into practice.

As mentioned earlier when speaking about frescoes, another Dionysian concept—that of hierarchy—was thought to be, at least partially, accountable for the erection and the adornment of some of the medieval structures. It is known that those we discuss here are rich in symbolism; several of them, as we have already noticed, contain representations (in sculpture and/or painting) of angels and of church dignitaries in the sophistication of their various ranking. Moreover, the very materiality of the buildings can witness to the fact that they are pointers to the characteristics of the Divine. Nadine Schibille elaborates on the aesthetic values peculiar to the Byzantine Empire, to the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, and to those maintained by the Neoplatonists in Late

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[45] Y. De Andia, *Henosis: l'union à Dieu chez Denys l'Aréopagite*, Philosophia Antiqua 71 (Leiden: Brill, 1996) and Y. De Andia, *Denys l'aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1997).

[46] Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 16. See also Mainoldi, "L'abate Sugerio e i suoi orizzonti mimetici," 23–45, and Dell'Acqua, "L'auctoritas dello pseudo-Dionigi."

[47] Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 16.

[48] *CD II*, 7–10.

[49] Bony, "What Possible Sources for the Chevet of Saint-Denis," 131–43.

[50] Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 16.

[51] Bogdanovic, "Rethinking the Dionysian Legacy," 132.

[52] Bogdanovic, "Rethinking the Dionysian Legacy," 132.

Antiquity. Schibille expands on the role of the senses and generally of perception within the encounters with Beauty people had in the sixth century, when this Constantinopolitan shrine dedicated to the Divine Wisdom was constructed.[53] Among other sources this researcher consulted, one is the *ekphrases* of the period.[54] The results of this exercise reveals that in the same way Pseudo-Dionysius's treatises do, these rhetorical descriptions make evident that the use of light (which is traditionally connected with wisdom), is one of the factors believed to be instrumental in the act of worship. Given this, it is to be expected that attention was paid in Byzantium to how the light was channelled within a sacred space. Liz James elaborates on this issue,[55] as does Bissera V. Pentcheva; the former is preoccupied with the way the reflection of light from the tesserae of the mosaics helps a believer to concentrate better during the act of worship, and the latter with specifying how, by their gleaming, the rays of the sun and the light of the candles fulfil the same function.[56] The way light was used in the arts and in the architecture dedicated to the sacred, and its impact on believers was a serious issue in the empire. As Louth emphasises, the reception of Pseudo-Dionysus's ideas, especially in Gregory of Palamas[57] and Maximus the Confessor's works, indicates that light was important for the aesthetics espoused by the texts written by the Syrian monk.[58] That is true and perhaps this is the place to mention again that the language of light—by its opposite, darkness—is employed by this thinker to designate the pinnacle of the mystical experience. The same prominent role that materiality and light peculiar to buildings is considered to play in the way people relate to God is granted by Bogdanovic. She contends that the main church in Studenica monastery, which she defines as a "Byzantine-Romanesque 'hybrid',"[59] was built "of fine marble, which under ideal conditions would grant it longevity …. Because the white polished marble of the church glitters and shines in the sunlight, it offers a confirmation about the sophistication people manifested in the manner in which they used light, especially that which didn’t have a clearly defined source.”[60] God, as the supreme beauty, was conceived to be the source of all light and to call people to himself by means of it. In a milieu infused by such ideas, the church was considered “a potent symbol that propels anagogical, uplifting movement.”[61] Bogdanovic takes her argument even further and claims that the three stages of Dionysian “orthopraxy”—purification, illumination, and perfection—correspond to those of “founding, building and bringing to completion,” which a construction undergoes during its coming into being. I am not certain that such a comparison is of significance because any act of creation has a point of beginning and phases of development as well as a moment of attainment. Nevertheless, generally speaking, the associations among various ideas this researcher makes are interesting.

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[53] N. Schibille, *Hagia Sophia and the Byzantine Aesthetic Experience* (London: Routledge, 2014).

[54] For renowned examples of *ekphrasis* in Byzantium see, for instance, Nicholas Mesarites (b. 1163), Cod. Gr. 350, called by August Heisenberg *Codex Ambrosianus*, fols. 93 sup.–96 sup. For the role of *ekphrasis* in general, see J. Elsner, "Introduction: The Genres of Ekphrasis," *Ramus* 31 (2002): 1–18; R. Webb, "The Aesthetics of Sacred Space: Narrative, Metaphor and Motion in Ekphraseis of Church Buildings," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 53 (1999): 59–74; L. James and R. Webb, "To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places: Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium," *Art History* 14 (1991): 1–17; H. Maguire, "Truth and Convention in Byzantine Descriptions of Works of Art," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 28 (1974): 111–40; G. Downey, "Ekphrasis," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 4 (1959): 921–44.

[55] L. James, *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

[56] B. V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); see also B. V. Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017) and B. V. Pentcheva, "Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics," *Gesta* 50 no. 2 (2011): 93–111.

[57] Louth, "Reception of Dionysius"; A. Golitzin, "Dionysius the Areopagite in the Works of Gregory Palamas: On the Question of a 'Christological Corrective' and Related Matters," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 46 (2002): 163–90; N. Sakharov, "The Uncreated Light in Palamas and in Elder Sophrony," in *Ο Άγιος Γρηγόριος ο Παλαμάς στην Ιστορία και το Παρόν*, ed. G.I. Mantzaridis (Athos: Vatopaidou Monastery, 2000), 307–18.

[58] Louth, "Reception of Dionysius."

[59] Bogdanovic, "Rethinking the Dionysian Legacy," 132.

The Dionysiac Corpus and Music

Indications about the music of the sixth century, mostly about that chanted in churches, exists in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, and it is noteworthy that some of what he states is still valid today. The liturgical hymnody that is supposed to be part of the heavenly eucharistic services is sung in every church on earth. Both Ivanov and Bogdanovic make remarks about the fact that Byzantine iconography indicate such a reality by inserting fragments of liturgical texts among images; the Trisagion hymn (“holy, holy, holy”) appears most often in such contexts (rendered in frescoes and icons).

Ernesto Mainoldi elaborates on the musical terminology and other related aspects in Pseudo-Dionysius’s work and considers that this is partially about the harmony of the universe, *harmonia mundi*. He builds his argument mainly on the fact that hierarchies are about order, hence about harmony, something that is peculiar not only to numerology, but also to music.[62] Mainoldi also identifies in the treatises about the ecclesiastical and the celestial hierarchies, as well as in *The Divine Names*, liturgical passages and textual expressions referring to those, as well as hymns sung outside the liturgical context and other chants. The liturgical hymnography mentioned is about baptism, the consecration of the Myron, and about funerary rites.[63] This information from the writings of the Syrian is important as it enriches our knowledge about liturgical and other church practices observed during his lifetime.

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[60] Bogdanovic, “Rethinking the Dionysian Legacy,” 132.

[61] Bogdanovic, “Rethinking the Dionysian Legacy,” 132.

[62] Ernesto Mainoldi, especially in “La musique dans l’univers Dionysien entre théologie mystique et ordre hiérarchique,” in *Mystique, langage, musique. Exprimer l’indicible* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming). See also E. S. Mainoldi, *Ars musica. La concezione della musica nel Medioevo* (Milan: Rugginenti, 2001) and “Accezioni e rifocalizzazioni del simbolismo musicale tra suono, numero e segno durante il medioevo,” *Philomusica on-line* 9 no. 3 (2010): 149–72, and, among others, A. Lingas, “From Earth to Heaven: The Changing Soundscape of Byzantine Liturgy,” in *Experiencing Byzantium: Papers from the 44th Spring Symposium of the Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies,* ed. M. Jackson and C. Nesbitt (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), 311–58.

Ivanov appreciates that the mosaics on the central dome in the Church of the Mother of God in Palermo (1143), in the baptistery in San Marco, Venice (thirteenth century), and in the apse of the church in Staro Nagoričino in Macedonia (c. 1316–1318) depict the liturgy in the celestial realm.[64] Bogdanovic elaborates on the latter thus: “Thrones, cherubim, seraphim, and angels are usually represented as celebrants of heavenly liturgy encircling God, leader of all understanding and action,” underlining the concordance of earthly and celestial liturgy in words, images, and rites.[65] Such an idea links with another she holds in connection with the architecture that is supposed to have been influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius’s notions:

> The builders of medieval churches in particular emphasized their material glory and beauty as inseparable from their *apophatic* aesthetics propelled by their *kataphatic*, material and sensible, and thus also symbolic, values. Such a participatory approach underlines the use of architecture to complement the material with the immaterial world as was done within the liturgy. The material body of architecture acquires significance beyond its nature and allows the beholder to “bring to completion” the union with God in the space beyond.[66]

I have elaborated elsewhere on the fact that in the case of Byzantine churches there is a connection between the liturgical setting, the painting, and architecture.[67] Here I mention a mosaic from a villa in Byzantine Syria (Mariamin; late fourth century AD) in which musical instruments are visible; these are an organ, aulos, and a lyre.[68]

Other church patrons and iconographers appreciated that the cymbals, flute, and the lyre, for instance, can have a role in the liturgy, just as they had in Jewish worship. Today the musical instruments have disappeared from the eucharistic services of Byzantine heritage (there are a few Greek churches in the diaspora—in Australia for certain—where the organ is played). Iconographers also depicted church hymnographers such as

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[63] E. S. Mainoldi, “La musica liturgica nel Corpus Dionysiacum,” *Rivista di Storia e Lettersatura religiosa* 54 no. 1 (2018): 53–72. There is substantial material published especially about baptism which is relevant to our discussion; see, for instance, Th. M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: West and East Syria* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 98.

[64] Ivanov, “Iconographic Interpretations,” 177.

[65] Bogdanovic, “Rethinking the Dionysian Legacy,” 121.

[66] Bogdanovic, “Rethinking the Dionysian Legacy,” 132.

[67] E. Ene D-Vasilescu, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Icons and Icon-painters in Romania* (Saarbrücken: VDM, 2009).

[68] Trudy Ring et al., eds, *International Dictionary of Historic Places: Middle East and Africa* (London: Routledge, 1996), 4; description on p. 318 in vol. 4.

John Cucuzeles[69] and Joseph the Hymnographer;[70] the former is famously depicted in a fifteenth-century musical codex at the Great Lavra Monastery, Mount Athos, where he lived, composed, and chanted.

And because we speak about customs related to the liturgy, we shall recount that it was a dispute in patristic literature whether the intimations about it in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* are about the liturgy in Constantinople or in Antioch. On this Paul L. Gavrilyuk concludes that "we have more grounds for believing that the EH reflects the liturgical customs of the Empire's capital than those of Antioch. Extrapolating this evidence, it seems reasonable to suggest that Dionysius the Areopagite could be with greater justification referred to as Dionysius of Constantinople."[71] Personally, I would be cautious in reaching a definite point of view on this subject because we cannot yet say with certainty how different the eucharistic services were in the sixth century in the two cities.

Conclusion

It seems that at least in some cases the presumption that a relationship exists between Pseudo-Dionysius's texts and various achievements in the arts and architecture is sustainable. Certainly, the Syrian conceived the "symbols at the level of what can be perceived through the senses as a kind of stepping-stone, provided by God's own love for humankind, to the realm of the intelligible—the spiritual, immaterial world, beyond which lies the divine."[72]

An appropriate conclusion to a study that has dealt with theology, senses, and the arts can be a reminder about how people experience and describe beauty. Plotinus, in *Enneads* 1.6, says:

> Beauty addresses itself chiefly to sight; but there is a beauty for the hearing too, as in certain combinations of words and in all kinds of music, for melodies and

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[69] John Cucuzeles/John Koukouzelis/Jan Kukuzeli was an Albanian-Bulgarian (born in Durazzo) composer, singer, and reformer of Orthodox Church music, who lived in the fourteenth century. He created for and chanted in the Great Lavra on Mount Athos. See, for instance, D. E. Conomos, "Koukouzeles, John," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium,* ed. A. Kazhdan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1155, and N. K. Moran, *Singers in Late Byzantine and Slavonic Painting* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 99–101. Kazhdan writes that John was already known as a composer by 1302 and that he died sometimes between 1360 and 1375 (100).

[70] Joseph the Hymnographer (and defender of icons) was a Greek born in c. 810 in Sicily. He was forced to leave his island in 830 in the wake of an invasion by the Arabs, journeying to Thessalonica and then to Constantinople, where eventually he founded a monastery; see, for instance, R. Hillier, "Joseph the Hymnographer and Mary the Gate," *Journal of Theological Studies* 36 (1985): 311–20.

[71] P. L. Gavrilyuk, "Did Pseudo-Dionysius Live in Constantinople?" *Vigiliae Christianae* 62 (2008): 514.

[72] A. Louth, "Cappadocian Fathers and Dionysius in Iconoclasm," in *Gregory of Nazianzus: Images and Reflections*, ed. J. Børtnes and T. Hägg (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen Press, 2006), 278.

> cadences are beautiful; and minds that lift themselves above the realm of sense to a higher order are aware of beauty in the conduct of life, in actions, in character, in the pursuits of the intellect; and there is the beauty of virtues … What, then, is it that gives comeliness to material forms and draws the ear to the sweetness perceived in sounds, and what is the secret of the beauty there is in all that derives from Soul?[73]

Augustine recognised Beauty in God, and felt that this was apt to lift his spirit up and generate love within (at the same time he expressed regret that material things brought him down.)[74] We know from his *Confessions* that actually, the soul of the bishop of Hippo, like that of any human being, continually ascended and descended during its journey towards God—to use Pseudo-Dionysius's terminology. It, like that of any human being, alternatively experienced the lightness of the divine beauty and the "heaviness" of the mundane world.

As we have indicated at the outset of this article, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite himself appreciated Beauty as being a divine energy and called God by this word. The "virtue" of Beauty is greeted by the senses and Rorem underlines the function they play in our lives: "Our context within this created world of space and time means that we humans are dependent upon sense perception."[75] This is true: beyond the physical mechanism of the sense organs, the senses in themselves, that is, as part of the mind, are responsible for the way we interpret the reality around us, including the artistic accomplishments people carry out.

But when the Syrian thinker merged the discussion about perceptible symbols and statues with that concerning the world of the soul,[76] he only did so in order to underline that the essence of things lies beyond the outcome of the activity of the senses and truly presents itself after much of what we perceive about the reality around us is left unattended to. Only then a person obtains glimpses into the kingdom of God; that happens through a mystical experience.

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[73] *Plotinus: The Enneads*, ed. and trans. S. MacKenna, rev. B. S. Page (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 56. For an elaboration on this see E. Ene D-Vasilescu, "'If You Wish to Contemplate God': Pseudo-Dionysius on Will," *Studia Patristica* 100 (2020): 247–57.

[74] See H. Chadwick, trans., *Saint Augustine, Confessions: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 127.

[75] Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 94.

[76] Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 193.

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